

The Thumb Test for Kirby

By SEWELL FORD

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I DON'T want to seem crabby about it, but I'd like to register an affidavit somewhere that I'm no matrimonial referee. Honest, that's one of the worst things I do.

Maybe you wouldn't think I'd have to say so; I guess most people would take it for granted. But, in case there should be another pair like this Paige girl and J. Kirby Brooks lurkin' anywhere in the background and foolish enough to call on me the way they did—well, I want to warn 'em, that's all. I'm a romance wrecker. And when it comes to directin' the course of true love down a stretch of rough water, I'm about as helpful as a plumber's apprentice tinkerin' a balky cuckoo clock.

The sad part about this case was that I meant well. First off, Nancy Paige was a favorite at our house, from Sadie to Mother Whaley. As for little Sully—well, say; if you want a real enthusiastic report on Miss Paige, just ask him.

As a rule, too, Sully ain't so partial to young female persons—not yet. Generally he hangs his head and pouts when they come around. But when Nancy shows up he lets out a war-whoop and makes a dive for her. He'll tow her off to the play-room and chatter away to her by the hour, as if she was a ten-year-old boy instead of a young lady goin' on twenty-two.

SORT of discovered Nancy, Sully did.

Let's see, it was one day summer before last that he came draggin' her into the yard by the hand and insists on showin' her his turtles and rabbits. Seems she'd run across him down the road apiece trying to capture a green garter-snake for his private zoo. And when she showed him how to spear it with a forked stick, grab it behind the ears, and stow it in an empty candy-box—well, after that he was hers for keeps.

"Say, Pop," he confides to me one night, "know who I'm goin' to marry when I grow up?"

"Couldn't guess," says I.

"Nancy," says he.

"Does she know it?" says I.

"Ho!" says he. "Course not."

And I suspicion that Miss Nancy thinks a good deal of Sully, though she never takes on about him the way some do.

"He's a real boy, isn't he?" is her usual remark after a session with Sully.

Not one of the gushy kind, Nancy. A quiet, well balanced young person, with steady gray eyes that don't seem to miss much, and a trick of smilin' to herself as if she found life entertainin'. No frills or bluff about her—one of the kind that seems to be too busy studyin' out other folks to think much about herself.

Neighbors of ours, the Paiges have been, ever since we've lived out at Rock-hurst-on-the-Sound. In fact, they were there long before we came, though their place down on the Point has been shut more'n it's been open. An odd, squatty, gray old house it is, with a ramblin' collection of wings and sheds tacked on promiscuous, and mostly smothered by vines and scraggly cedars. Looks sort of run-to-seed, you know.

But there's only Nancy and her mother; and old lady Paige—Mrs. Dyckman-Paige, she is—has the name of bein' a bit peculiar. Not batty, you understand, but independent and freaky. Maybe that comes from havin' lived so long in such outlandish places—Siam and Morocco. It was tryin' to cure Mr. Dyckman-Paige of something or other that started 'em roamin', and by the time he finally cashed in I guess she'd kind of got the habit. Anyway, I gather that she wouldn't have come back to Rockhurst when she did, only the rest of the map was so mussed up with siege-guns and submarines.

And while she was pleasant enough when people took pains to hunt her up, she didn't go out often or show any signs of wantin' to mix much.

Mrs. Paige herself was kind of lame—some trouble with one hip joint. A hook-nosed old dame she was, with shrewd eyes, prominent cheek-bones, and a solid set chin. She was fond of gettin' herself up in queer rigs, Japanese silk things and such. Smoked cigarettes, too, so they say.

"But, for all that," Sadie reports, "she's bright and interesting. I like her. As for Nancy, she's a jewel."

So our house was one of the few places where the Paiges occasionally came for dinner; and, on account of Sully, Nancy ran in quite often. So much for them.

THIS J. Kirby Brooks, now, was a different proposition—one of Purdy-Pell's office staff that Mrs. Purdy-Pell had sort of taken up and entered in the younger set. It was her idea, too, I suspect, his comin' to the Physical Culture Studio for a course of boxin' lessons.

"Want to learn how to steam in a few stiff ones, in case you get in a mix-up, eh?" says I.

"Why—er—not exactly," says he. "I'm quite sure I should never allow myself to become involved in—er—in that way. But I'm told that boxing tends to give one a better poise—to make one more flexible, as it were."

"Well," says I, "you could stand a little limberin' up, that's a fact."

That's how I come to get next to J. Kirby. Course, I don't know much about the bond brokerage business. I expect it don't call for any shifty foot-work, but how he could be very useful anywhere was beyond me; for his mind seems to work almost as stiff as his neck. Anyway, he's one of these rubber-stamp conversers: you know, never usin' anything but book talk, always polite, but just as free and chatty as a set of stencils.

It's the same with his dressin'. Very particular about his clothes, J. Kirby. Why, I expect if he was ever caught out wearin' a soft hat with a frock-coat, he'd sneak home in a taxi with the blinds pulled down.

Honest, for a salaried man he had some mighty high notions. So many things struck him as vulgar—table d'hôte dinners, ready-made shirts, tinted note-paper, havin' to carry home a package, and livin' at a boarding-house. He had bachelor quarters somewhere, and a fifth share in a valet. Also he sported silk underwear, drank tea for breakfast, and wore a wrist-watch. A reg'lar chappie, barrin' his keepin' business hours.

And yet, J. Kirby had made good in the bond house. I'd known of his comin' up from a clerk to one of Purdy-Pell's confidential men. And I understand he wasn't so much of a flivver at the social act. He had Mrs. Purdy-Pell as a coach, the whole game being to see if he couldn't annex some lippy young Gladys-Maude whose poppa would settle an income on her.

So I didn't take much notice of how frequent him and Miss Paige happened to meet at our house. Still, they did seem to get along together, after a fashion. Somehow, he appeared to know when he was likely to run across her at our house, and, either before or after he'd been to the Purdy-Pells', he'd drop in. And Sadie's trained me when to duck in such cases. I'd get glimpses, though, of Nancy sittin' quiet, watchin' him in that smilin' way of hers. My guess was that she got more or less amusement out of J. Kirby, and that he was sort of practisin' on her.

And then, here the other night along about ten-thirty, as I'm settled comfy before the livin'-room fire, Sadie comes up behind and taps me on the shoulder.



"I was just smotherin' a grin, when out comes the maid and hands me a globe full of goldfish."

"Shorty," says she, "some one wants to see you."

"Eh? Me?" says I, rubbin' my eyes.

"A young man—some one you know."

"All right," says I. "Bring him in."

"But he wants to talk to you privately," says Sadie. Then, in a whisper,

"It's Kirby Brooks. He's in the study."

"Huh!" says I. "What the blazes—"

"Oh, do go in and hear what he has to say," says Sadie. "I'm dying to know."

MAYBE I'd been more cordial if it had been earlier in the evenin'. As it is, I'm smotherin' a yawn as I strolls in where J. Kirby is pacin' the floor restless.

"McCabe," says he, "I trust you will pardon me for imposing on your good nature in this manner, but—"

"Who's been pinched for what?" says I. "If it's a matter of bail bond, let's have the details."

"Oh, it's nothing of the sort, I assure you," says he. "In fact, it's about—er—Miss Paige."

"Nancy!" says I. "What's she been up to?"

"No, no!" says he. "You fail to understand. I am in a quandary, that is all."

"Never met one," says I. "What's it like?"

He shrugs his shoulders hopeless, but begins all over again. Well, in his mealy-mouthed way it took him near a quarter of an hour to state the proposition; but when I do surround the idea, believe me, I'm wide awake.

"So?" says I, surveyin' him slit-eyed. "You've been careless enough to go and get soft on Nancy, eh?"

He nods. "I have grown very fond of her," says he.

"But you have your doubts," I goes on, "whether she's quite good enough for you."

"Oh, I say!" he protests.

"Amounts to that, don't it?" says I. "But chiefly you're after a line on her financial ratin'. That correct?"

He fingers his collar nervous, as if it was chafin' his neck.

"I merely intended to suggest," says he, "that I could hardly afford to—er—"

"I get you," says I.

Then I blazes ahead sort of crisp: "Now listen to me, Kirby, while I tell you a few things. First off, you're dead right. She ain't good enough for you—"

not by a mile. You're too elegant a party for her—too classy and refined altogether. Course, you've come up from nothing much. I don't know just

where you started; but that don't matter. You're a perfectly nice young gent now. You keep yourself tubbed and tailored and manicured like a pet Pomeranian. You've practised pink-tea manners until they come almost natural, and you do the society patter so it can hardly be detected from the real thing. While Miss Paige—well, she's apt to be a bit crude, ain't she?"

"Oh, see here," he breaks in. "I didn't mean that she was not—"

"Sure, I know," says I. "You're partial to her, though. And that's what's apt to get you in wrong. But lemme point out that she wouldn't do for you at all. Your talents run to usherin' at weddin's, and bein' nice to the patronesses at subscription dances, and gettin' yourself asked around. Nancy would want you to play golf and tennis with her, and she'd smear you at either. Besides, there's mother. By the way, Kirby, how do you and Mrs. Dyckman-Paige hit it off?"

He sort of shivers.

"Rather badly, I fear," says he. "She—she is always asking me if I have a stiff neck. Once she insisted on rubbing it with some atrocious-smelling oil. I haven't been there since. Their home is such a weird, old-fashioned place, too."

"Oh, well," says I, "what do you expect?"

He bit at that.

"But she is not really poor, is she?"

"So that's why you tackled me, eh?" I demands.

"I—I thought you would know," says he; "and, naturally, I was—"

"I see," says I. "I'll tell you this much: the old girl is wearin' the same hat she landed in nearly two years ago."

Kirby sighs deep.

"I—I thought as much," says he. "Sorry if I've bothered you, and—and thanks awfully."

I GRINNED as I let him out the side door, and when I goes back to Sadie I'm lookin' cheerful and satisfied.

"Wasn't it something about Nancy?" she asks.

"It was," says I, "but I put a crimp in it."

"You didn't discourage him, did you?" says she.

"Didn't I, though!" says I. "Why, that poor prune went away with his mangy little romance shot as full of holes as a Swiss cheese. He won't hang around Nancy any more, I'm bettin'."

So it was more or less of a jolt, the very